

A Descriptive Analysis of Community
Self-Help Programs In Eastern Kentucky

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Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the self-help approach used by several rural community groups located in eastern Kentucky to address local problems. The data used to write this report were collected in the early summer of 1983 via personal visits to the communities being discussed and through unstructured, personal interviews with the leaders and development club members. The development club in each study community provided extensive information regarding their activities, goals and aspirations. The accomplishments of each club were discussed during the interviewing sessions and later with extension development staff. Physical structures and equipment acquired during the course of the clubs' existence were examined.

The paper begins with a brief overview of socio-demographic characteristics of the study communities to provide the reader with some insight to the types of community groups being discussed. The next section examines the goals and objectives of the development clubs followed by a brief discussion of the techniques used to implement the development decisions. The report concludes with an assessment of the effectiveness of the self-help efforts in terms of solving the problems identified by the groups.

The Study Situation

Each of the 10 study communities shared many of the same socio-demographic characteristics. Each community was very small (100-400 people) in terms of population base and most were in the process of

dying via outmigration prior to the initiation of development programs. Observation of the age composition of the communities during my visits revealed a large number of older people and a large number of young people with a relatively small number of people in the young adult (active population) age groups. This is undoubtedly the result of outmigration of young adults once high school has been completed. Development club members in several communities observed that a major problem for the community was keeping young adults. They believe that little can be done about the problem until jobs are created in the local area.

Each of the study communities had experienced socio-economic decline at some time during their recent past (5-10 years previously). Eight of the 10 communities have stabilized or are now growing slowly in terms of population. Many people in the growth oriented communities attribute the population expansion to increased socio-economic viability of the community. While a cause-effect relationship between the development club programs and renewed community viability would be difficult to prove, it is interesting to note that the population growth closely followed the initiation of community development efforts in the study groups.

The study communities are primarily composed of lower economic classes. Economic resources are, therefore, not easily accessible in any of the community groups visited. The poor economic status of the study groups makes the accomplishments of the development clubs even more impressive.

The community groups are white and protestant which is quite common in rural Appalachia. Unlike previous stereotypes of Appalachians, however, the people in the study communities are enthusiastic about the future, are committed to change programs which work, are not traditionalistic and are certainly not fatalistic. In fact, their success against great odds is moot evidence they are future oriented.

The study groups are committed to maintenance of community vitality and to increasing the ability of local people to solve their own problems. The reason for this commitment is quite simple and was stated eloquently by one of the study participants even though many verbalized the same idea in different ways. The old lady said simply "This is our home and we want to stay." Everyone attending the public meetings held at the time of my visits agreed that efforts should be initiated and maintained which would create a situation where people would have the residential choice of remaining in their home communities rather than being "forced" to leave to find work elsewhere.

The topography of the study region is hilly to very mountainous. Therefore, each of the study groups shares a common trait of relative physical isolation. While the groups are exposed to "outside" influence by the printed and electronic media, interaction outside of the community is not frequent by contemporary middle-class standards. Visits to regional towns and cities do occur but most of the interaction takes place within their own community boundaries or with residents of adjacent communities. This suggests that external influences are not great except through the Kentucky Cooperative Extension. Local people interact frequently with the community resource development agent and the

county agricultural agent. Unfortunately, recent reduction in funding has necessitated the elimination of the extension community resource development agent from the study region which will further reduce an already poor resources base for local groups. While the county agricultural agents are excellent people and well intentioned, they are not trained in the complexities of human and community development.

Wide geographic dispersion of the resident populace is another common characteristic of the community groups. Given the topography, community members are often scattered throughout the hollows surrounding a central location of houses or small grocery store-gasoline station which gives the community its name. This settlement pattern makes it difficult to maintain frequent contact with community members and acts as an impediment to collective action. This is especially true when dirt roads become impassable to even trucks during periods of bad weather.

The service infrastructure of the study communities are very poor but are improving due to the development efforts. Given the size of the population bases, it is highly improbable that specialized needs such as medical and dental services will ever be located in the study communities. There is no police protection provided by local groups. The community groups depend on county agencies to provide police services. Highways are poor and frequently are not well maintained, especially some of the unpaved roads. Central water and sewerage systems are absent but three of the study communities will soon be serviced by modern water and sewer systems. Recreational facilities are seldom available even though recent efforts by the

development clubs have improved the situation somewhat.

Busing of children to consolidated schools is quite common in the study region. The bus rides are often long and can be problematic in poor weather. The qualitative aspects of school facilities is a serious problem in one study community and of concern in others. The declining population base of one community group resulted in the loss of the local elementary school but collective action resulted in the re-opening of the facility.

The economic bases of the study groups are quite poor which imposes a serious constraint on the development clubs' ability to resolve some community problems. There are some jobs in the extractive industries (mining and timber) but other types of employment (industry and service) are very scarce. There is some commuting to larger towns in the region where job opportunities are more plentiful but the economic system in eastern Kentucky is not highly diversified. Elaboration of the economic structure in the region will be required to provide jobs for local people but it is highly doubtful that local development groups will ever be able to affect the economic variables to any great extent. It was interesting to note in our interviewing sessions that the development club members and leaders recognized their inability to greatly affect the economic structure. They were wise in focusing their efforts on programs and projects which they could accomplish.

Another characteristic of the study groups is the relative long tenure of the residents. A large percentage of each study group had lived in their present community all of their lives. The club members' families often had a long history of association with their respective

community and/or the region. It is also quite common for the families to be related in some manner.

Individuals familiar with the existing Appalachian literature focused on rural community groups will recognize many characteristics discussed in this introduction. Observations made in the study communities by this author compare favorably with community groups of similar socio-economic status in West Virginia and southeastern Ohio. It is highly likely that the problems identified within the study groups are present in other Appalachian communities with similar characteristics. The strategies used to solve the problems should also be applicable.

Development Goals

The action goals of the development clubs correspond closely to the issues presented in the previous section. A consistent concern expressed by the 10 study community groups was service provision. Each of the development clubs had programs to provide water and/or fire protection. Building programs designed to provide community centers and recreation facilities were high on the priority lists of each community group. Programs to increase community integration and solidarity were also highly valued by each community group.

The techniques used to establish development priorities were in one form or another variations on collective participatory democracy. Development club members, community residents who were not club members and the extension community resources development agent held numerous meetings to discuss the various problems identified in the study communities. This approach in many ways approximates the New England

town meetings where all views were expressed and considered. Over time the development problems were identified and priorities for addressing them were established. In each study community the first development effort of any magnitude was the creation of a community center. The development clubs without exception recognized that a community center was necessary to provide a central meeting location for the residents but that it also provided a place where other community functions could occur, such as recreation for various age groups.

Once the community center was built and put into operation, it became the meeting place for the development club. Since non-club members used the facility for recreation and other community functions, they quickly became aware of the clubs' activities and often became members. User fees for use of the facilities also served to provide revenue for paying electricity and heating bills.

In essence, the community centers provided the means of generating: community pride, favorable attitudes among community residents for cooperative efforts, larger membership and involvement in the development club's programs, community leadership, and participation in community affairs. Each of these consequences are desirable outcomes of development action.

Once the community centers were built and operating, the clubs began to direct their efforts toward other problem areas. Recreation facilities were logical extensions of the community centers since the building was already in place. Landscaping combined with construction of children's slides and swings or ball fields created a multi-purpose facility that involved a wide variety of age groups. One community

expanded the baseball-softball facilities and started an outdoor recreation program which eventually expanded to include adjacent communities. It is highly likely the development club membership in that community will be greatly enhanced by people living in the cooperating communities. The club will probably become a multi-community program.

This author was impressed with the number of programs initiated by the development clubs which were focused on the aged. Sewing, cooking, quilting and general handicrafts were some of the ways the aged were integrated into the activities of the community centers.

Once the recreation programs became operative, the next major project initiated by the clubs was usually a volunteer fire department. Four of the study communities have already implemented rural fire departments and are extremely proud of their accomplishments. These programs are extremely expensive and require careful planning and a great number of human and economic resources from the community. A building is required to house the fire vehicles and fire fighting equipment must be purchased. All of the community groups placed very high value on fire protection. The volunteer fire departments apparently serve the purpose of providing some element of perceived safety. They also serve as a means of attaining social status in the group for those persons actively involved. Lastly, the activities of the volunteers serve to bring the community group closer together in terms of group cohesion. Each of these functions have merit from a development perspective.

Mechanisms For Implementing Programs

Many development programs die for lack of "means" to implement well conceived programs but such is not the case in the study communities.

Even in the study community with the fewest resources there were some successes. In most of the study communities there were many successes.

The methods used to attain the goals established by the collective groups were remarkably similar. All of the projects evaluated were conceived by local people and funded from community resources with the exception of the large, central-system water projects. The clubs were resolute in their commitment to solve local problems without depending on outside resources. While the study groups were not opposed to using outside resources, they were prepared to undertake the development tasks using their own resources.

Many small money-making projects were used to collect economic resources to be used in the development programs. Several of the activities used by the study groups are: bake sales, car washes, raffles, road blocks (asking for donations from people passing by on the highway), quilt sales, turkey shoots, cook book sales (ladies in one community put together an Appalachian cookbook, published the materials and marketed the book), donations from businesses (construction materials or products to raffle), catered dinners, ice cream socials, dances, community carnivals, garage sales, and other small-scale money-making projects (one community organized a hillbilly rock band and the group is doing well financially). These efforts over time generated enough money to purchase needed materials and equipment to implement the second phase of the development strategy.

The next step in the development effort was the "collective construction" phase. Volunteers from the local community were used to build community centers, recreation facilities, fire stations,

rebuild trucks, and so forth. This activity is quite similar to the old "barn raising" of our rural past. Local people took great pride in the fact that they had contributed to the actual construction of the community centers, fire stations or recreation facilities. While some people possessed no construction skills, others were quite experienced builders and taught those willing to help how to use tools and basic construction skills. This approach served to raise the skill levels in the community while simultaneously contributing to project completion. An unanticipated outcome of the informal training was use of the building skills acquired in the construction phase of the community programs to improve homes and neighborhoods.

The development clubs were often able to extend their meager resources by securing materials at reduced rates from construction suppliers. Building suppliers located outside of the local community often provided building supplies at reduced rates as their contribution to the development effort.

The key element to this development strategy was again self-help. The people did the work themselves. What is very exciting about this approach is that it involved nearly everyone in the community from the very young to the very old. Each person could make his/her contribution either in securing money via one of the aforementioned activities or by contributing building skills and/or labor to the construction phase of the project. The ladies, for example, in each community which had built a community center took great pride in the fact they had been instrumental in securing the center for the community. Many of the older ladies were very active in handicrafts by teaching skills,

such as quilting, to younger people. The aged were given a very useful role and they responded eagerly to the opportunity. One of the benefits often overlooked in such development efforts is the renewed self-esteem of the aged who can and do contribute to community programs.

The fact the community centers came into being is evidence the approach worked. Of even greater importance is the extensive uses made of the centers by club and non-club members which indicates they were needed. It should also be noted that the increases in community pride, feelings of identity with the community, expanded confidence among group members that they possessed the ability to accomplish goals, increased leadership skills, increased community cohesiveness and so forth are intangible benefits from the development efforts.

The "volunteer" concept was extended in several communities beyond the construction of facilities. Recreation programs required officials and program directors. Recreation leagues for youth and ladies required organization skills and volunteer workers. Again, local volunteers came forward to coach, officiate, direct programs, etc. Leadership skills were learned and the participants benefitted.

Old pieces of fire equipment were purchased at scrap price from other fire departments and refurbished by volunteer labor. One community secured a large truck from a regional industry for a pittance because a club member worked for the firm. The truck was practically dismantled and put back together by volunteer mechanics. The result was a fine piece of fire fighting equipment which was practically hand-made.

The necessary safety equipment for each volunteer fire fighter is very costly and beyond the means of individuals to purchase. Again,

the local populace provided the means to purchase equipment. The same tactics noted above were used to secure money. Ice cream socials and catered dinners equipped many volunteer fire fighters in eastern Kentucky.

There were many other projects which could be mentioned but they are not required. The same methodology was employed regardless of the nature of the project. The tactics worked in all circumstances where local people believed the projects to be worthwhile.

An Assessment of Self-Help Programs

The self-help programs which were observed in eastern Kentucky are very impressive given the obstacles the local groups had to overcome. It is amazing that such small communities were able to accomplish so many goals with so few economic resources. These are excellent examples of how collective action can be used to solve serious problems without relying on outside technical and economic resources. Self-help programs can work if properly implemented.

Many of the successes of the self-help efforts are not easily identifiable because they are social and psychosocial rather than tangible. People in the study communities, for example, have become very proud of their community group and have developed strong identities with their neighbors. Such was not the case several years ago. The groups are now cohesive which means they can collectively pursue other development goals. This was not true prior to the development club efforts. Leadership capacities have been and continue to be developed which are essential to any viable community group. Each of these are successes which should

be recognized.

Quite often too much attention is focused on physical structures or tangible outcomes when community groups become engaged in development programs. Groups may accomplish specific goals but lose the opportunity to improve the social environment of the group. In like manner, the social processes may be emphasized too much which will produce a situation where group cohesiveness is improved but little is accomplished to solve the problem that brought the development group into existence. It is my assessment that the study groups were able to achieve an excellent blend of material and non-material accomplishments.

The form of social organization employed by the development clubs is worthy of comment. The groups which were most successful adopted a "coordination function" rather than a "director function" to accomplish their goals. Within each community there were several groups working simultaneously on several related but separate projects. The development club acted as a "facilitator" rather than a director of the on-going efforts. This "loose confederation" of interests and activities is probably the most effective form of social organization among grass-roots groups using a participatory democracy approach. The fact the development clubs have learned this approach to local development is a very important accomplishment. Organizational skills are essential to development programs and most of the clubs observed have learned them well.

In sum, it is truly refreshing to observe development clubs working so well together. It is also a pleasure to observe local residents taking control of their own destiny and asking for no financial support from

government bodies. These groups should be used as role models by other community groups with similar problems.